

A NEW THEORY OF SEX IDENTITY:  
PROPOSED AREAS OF APPLICATION

by

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The current debate about women and men is in desperate need of a new model of sex identity, for it is frequently trapped between two old models of sex identity, which I call sex polarity and sex unity. If the concepts of 'equality' and 'differentiation' are taken as central to theories of sex identity, then the difference between sex polarity and sex unity can be described as follows:

Sex polarity claims that the sexes are significantly different but not equal. In its traditional form, as defended by Aristotle, man is thought to be superior; in its reverse form, as defended by radical feminists, woman is thought to be superior.

Sex unity claims that the sexes are equal and not significantly different. Plato first articulated this theory, but it is commonly found in the unisex philosophies present in much contemporary feminist thought. A derivative form of sex unity, which I call sex neutrality, merely assumes that the sexes are not significantly different. Sex unity, on the other hand, attempts to prove this philosophical assumption.

The failure of philosophy to develop and defend a third alternative to sex unity and sex polarity has had serious repercussions for Western culture and civilization. This third alternative would have as its basic concepts the equality as well as the significant differentiation of women and men. Although this particular theory was first tentatively expressed by Hildegard of Bingen, a twelfth century philosopher, for a number of important historical reasons it was soon overpowered by versions of sex polarity and sex neutrality.<sup>1</sup>

There is some difficulty in settling on an effective name for this third theory of sex identity, which defends both the equality and the differentiation of the sexes. After considering several alternatives, sex complementarity appears to be the most suitable name, even though in the past it has been abused by sex polarity theorists. Their abuse consisted in the claim that complementarity implied the equality of the sexes while, in fact, it really involved the superiority of man over woman. In other words, their complementarity collapsed into a hidden form of sex polarity. Even with this history of abuse, however, it would seem that sex complementarity, at the deepest level of understanding, demands a true equality of woman and man.<sup>2</sup> Authentic sex complementarity should, therefore, be able to resist a fall into either sex polarity or sex unity.

For the 1983 World Congress of Philosophy, which has chosen the theme of the relation of philosophy to culture, it is interesting to consider whether the above outline of three theories of sex identity has any practical consequences. While it is not possible in this short paper to consider this important question in depth, I would like nonetheless to sketch out four areas in which the theory of sex complementarity could play a role in guiding practical decisions. Generally speaking, these areas can be delineated as (1) Law, (2) Education, (3) Research, and (4) Personal Lives.

The law, for centuries dominated by a sex polarity model of sex identity, has shifted radically in our century towards a model of sex neutrality. This shift has caused contortions such as the need to classify pregnancy under the category of a disease, in order to avoid any special differentiation for women. A sex complementarity model would allow for the

true differentiation between the sexes under the law, without endangering their legal equality. Pregnancy is clearly not a disease, and should be legally recognized as such.

Another example of the artificial "either/or" between sex polarity and sex unity was seen in recent debate about the Equal Rights Amendment in the United States and the Bill of Rights in Canada. A problem arose because equality before the law appeared to imply non-differentiation of men and women. This led to the following emotionally charged claims, which were reported in U.S. and Canadian media during the years 1980 and 1982 :

the passage of the ERA or the adoption of the Bill of Rights would mean the end of separate public restrooms for women and men, the drafting of women to fight in wars, the end of preferential automobile rates for women drivers, the end of sexually segregated rooming houses, and the end of the right of a woman to be supported by her husband.

In all of the above examples, a hidden premise implied that equality before the law would necessitate the non-differentiation of women and men in all situations. It must be admitted that the rationale for this implication flows from the rather frequent practice of members of the judicial system of making the mistaken judgement, that equality means non-differentiation. with this accumulation of erroneous practice, it is all the more crucial for philosophers to point out that equality and differentiation are not incompatible.<sup>3</sup>

Affirmative action and preferential hiring would also be aided by the introduction of a theory of sex complementarity. Many contemporary sex unity and sex neutrality theorists are extremely perplexed by the problems of justice posed in these two practices. If a man and a woman are equal, they

ask, then how can preferential treatment of women be justified? Sex complementarity could provide a rationale for considering collective as well as individual justice, in that differentiation between the sexes would involve an historical as well as a biological component.<sup>5</sup>

## II.

The application of a theory of sex complementarity to educational issues can be seen in a consideration of various views about the proper place and longevity of women's studies. After the exclusion of women from higher education, beginning with the University of Paris in the thirteenth century, most universities embodied a sex polarity structure. The teaching of philosophy within this structure, on the other hand, embodied a sex neutrality perspective which was, in part, derived from an emphasis on logic and mathematics as the proper methodology for the discipline.

Today, we are offered various options for women's studies which seek to overcome this tradition of the sex polarity structure of universities, combined with the sex neutrality curriculum of courses. Radical feminists who hold a model of reverse sex polarity, that is, of belief in the superiority of woman over man, assert that women's studies must take place outside the university.<sup>6</sup> Traditional sex polarity theorists, on the other hand, argue that women's studies is faddish and non-academic. Sex unity theorists claim that within the university, women's studies might be needed as a temporary measure until all information about the sexes is integrated into regular curriculum. They long for the day when women's studies will cease to exist.

When the underlying premises of these views are examined, it becomes

apparent that reverse sex polarity theorists devalue the contribution of men to scholarship and learning, and that, conversely, traditional sex polarity theorists devalue the contribution of women to knowledge as well as the historical contributions of women to society. For both of these theories, the differentiation of the sexes leads to their inequality. On the other hand, the sex unity theorists appear to believe that there are ultimately no significant differences between women and men, and that there will not be any perpetual value in studying one sex in distinction to the other. For sex unity theorists, then, equality leads to non-differentiation.

The value of sex complementarity for this debate about the nature and future of women's studies, is that it promotes a flexible attitude towards both the structure and curriculum of universities. To understand the sexes as being both significantly different and equal, would allow for the possibility of a variety of structural options, such as men's colleges, women's colleges, and co-educational colleges.<sup>7</sup> To differentiate a college by sex involves reference to the administrative orientation and tradition of the college, rather than to the sex of all the students. In this way, a woman's college would be open to male students and vice versa.

A model of sex complementarity could also provide a flexible approach to curriculum. Most courses in a university will eventually include reference to sexually integrated data. However, there will always be room for a few courses which would focus on women's history and situation in distinction from other more inclusive assessments; in a similar way, it would be of value to have courses which differentiate men's history and situation. Once again, attendance at such courses should be open to

members of both sexes. I might even be so bold as to suggest that, ideally, all women and men would be required to take a course in women's studies and a course in men's studies before graduating from university! In any event, the sex complementarity model appears to be the most useful in countering the pressures of sex polarity and sex unity in contemporary education.

### III.

Research is an area related to, but not identical with, education. A model of sex complementarity could be useful for research by opening up a new avenue for funding mechanisms, and for the publication of the results of studies about sex identity. It has become apparent that journals have a tendency to publish articles which support their hidden assumptions. For example, a journal which carries an editorial board with a sex unity model of sex identity, would not be interested in publishing a study which claimed that boys were different from girls in some aspect of the reasoning process. Or, conversely, a journal with an editorial preference of the sex polarity model, might dismiss a study which indicated no significant differences between boys and girls in some area of scholastic achievement.<sup>8</sup> The dominance in our culture of the theories of sex unity and sex polarity, means that a study which would tend to support the thesis of sex complementarity, that is, of significant differentiation and equality of women and men, might have difficulty being published. Barring the conversion of sex polarity and sex unity editors, it might be useful to establish some journals with an editorial openness to a sex complementarity

model of sex identity.

For an individual researcher as well, sex complementarity offers a possibility which is not available to the other two options. To enter into research with an open mind about differences between the sexes, but with a belief in the inherent quality of women and men, would allow the researcher to explore the actual ways in which the sexes relate to the world. Carol Gilligan's study of the differences in development of moral reasoning in women and men is a ground-breaking example of the use of the model of sex complementarity for research.<sup>9</sup> The extremely controversial exploration of the relation between sex identity and the use of the right left parts of the brain, is another interesting area to consider. The question is not whether we are different by virtue of our sex, but how are we different?

A cursory study of some of the historical examples of research within the sex unity or sex polarity models, leads me to make the following observations. When a theory of sex unity is deeply probed, it almost invariably reveals a devaluation of the materiality of human existence. This devaluation might be of the body, of one's historical situation, or of what is sometimes called the "facticity" of human existence. Plato, the Cartesian feminists or, more recently, Shulamith Firestone, serve as examples of this tendency.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand, sex polarity theorists tend to isolate and inflate one specific material aspect of woman or man. Aristotle chose the capacity to concoct seed, Freud chose the male sexual anatomy, Sartre chose the activity of the male sexual organ, and Stephen Goldberg chose the



hormone "testosterone", for the philosophical basis of male superiority.<sup>11</sup> Conversely, Henrich Cornelius Agrippa chose the material of a woman's body, Ashley Montagu and Valerie Solanis chose the female chromosomal structure, and Jill Johnson chose woman's capacity to give birth as a philosophical basis for the superiority of woman.<sup>12</sup>

Faced with this tendency to devalue the materiality of the human condition by the sex unity theorists, or to overvalue one aspect of the materiality of the human condition by the sex polarity theorists, it would seem that sex complementarity theorists have an important challenge to keep human materiality in balance with other aspects of the human situation, such as rationality, individuality, spirituality, and so on.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, I would like to suggest, although this cannot be proved here, that sex complementarity may very well be the only theory which could provide a balanced view of the identity and proper relation of the sexes.

#### IV.

The last area I would like to mention as involving a practical application of the philosophical theory of sex complementarity is what I have called simply "personal lives". In the last two years, it has been my privilege to speak with two women who are on the frontier of women's accomplishments. Anne LaBastille is a well known conservationist, who frequently travels by herself for long periods of time into wilderness areas.<sup>14</sup> Arlene Blum is the leader of the successful women's climb of Annapurna.<sup>15</sup> Both of these women have found that their success in traditionally male kinds of activities, have led many people within the

sex polarity tradition to consider them as "wanting to be a man", instead of understanding their motivation to be love of wilderness, conservation, mountain climbing, camping, and trekking. Indeed, they both eschew the claim that they are examples of a new "female machisma", or women who love competing with, and beating, men.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, it is important to both Anne LaBastille and Arlene Blum that they are women who have achieved their respective extraordinary goals. The sex unity theorists would argue that their sex should not matter, that they are merely individuals who have accomplished something. A theory of sex complementarity would enable them to claim their success as women, without forcing them into a competition with men. Perhaps it is worth concluding this example by simply stating that they have both expressed to me, that a philosophical defense of the theory of sex complementarity would be of great help to them in their lives and work. If this can be achieved, then philosophy could have a concrete effect on people outside the academic milieu.

What, then, can philosophers do to develop a theory of sex complementarity? The first thing is to recognize that there is a real need for this goal to be achieved. I hope that the above examples provide sufficient evidence of this fact. The next step is to consider how the different theories of sex identity developed historically. In The Concept of Woman From 700 B.C. to 1300 A.D.: The Aristotelian Revolution, I have begun this lengthy analysis.<sup>17</sup> However, there is much more work that needs to be done.

Finally, it is necessary for philosophers to recognize the specific

barriers which today inhibit the development of a theory of sex complementarity, the foremost of which is the monopoly of the "either/or" of sex polarity vs. sex unity. A sex complementarity theorist must firmly plant a third alternative to this dichotomy by insisting that the differentiation of woman and man should not slide into a devaluation of either sex, nor that the equality of woman and man slide into a lack of differentiation between the two sexes.

More importantly, the philosopher of sex complementarity must seek to discover and articulate how woman and man are simultaneously different and equal. It is my hope that this proposal for a new theory of sex identity will be met by an enthusiastic search for a contemporary philosophy of sex complementarity.

## FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup>Hildegard of Bingen, Heilkunde, Salzburg: Otto Muller Verlag, 1957. Sex polarity, as a theory, gained dominance in Europe through the influx of Aristotelian theory at the University of Paris by 1255. Sex unity was later developed through Cartesianism in the 17th and 18th centuries.
- <sup>2</sup>It is interesting to note that the concept "complementarity" is surfacing again in many high quality feminist works. See Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice, Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 1982. "Development for both sexes would therefore seem to entail an integration of rights and responsibilities through the discovery of the complementarity of these disparate views." p. 100.
- <sup>3</sup>It is interesting to note the difference between the United States and Canada here. The ERA was rejected while the Bill of Rights was finally adopted. Could it be that Canada is more comfortable with the concept of different but equal through its preservation of distinct cultural and linguistic groups?
- <sup>4</sup>See, for example, Lisa Newton, "Reverse Discrimination as Unjustified" in Sex Equality, edited by Jane English, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1977.
- <sup>5</sup>The best discussion of this issue is found in Janet Radcliffe Richards, The Sceptical Feminist: A Philosophical Enquiry, London, Boston and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.
- <sup>6</sup>See Mary Daly, Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism, Boston: Beacon Press, 1978.
- <sup>7</sup>See the following sources for further discussion of this issue: Jane Gould, "The Case for Barnard College: A Feminist Statement", unpublished article, 1976; "History of Smith College", an excerpt from Smith College Calendar, 1977/78 Series 71, Sept. 1977; and Elizabeth Tidball and Vera Kistiakowsky, "Baccalaureate Origin of American Scientists and Scholars" in Science, 193, 1976, pp. 646-652.
- <sup>8</sup>See Olga Eizner Favreau, "Sex Bias in Psychological Research:", Canadian Psychological Review, Vol. 18, No. 1, January 1977, pp. 56-65.
- <sup>9</sup>Carol Gilligan, op. cit.
- <sup>10</sup>Plato, Republic, Laws; Poulain de la Barre, De l'égalité des deux sexes, published 1673; Ann (Finch) Conway, The Principles of the Most Ancient and Modern Philosophy, published 1690; Margaret Cavendish, Duchess of Newcastle, Observations Upon Experimental Philosophy, published 1666, Grounds of Natural Philosophy, published 1688, Description of a New World, Called the Blazing World, published 1688, and "Female Orations" in Orations of Diverse Sorts, published 1668; and Shulamith Firestone, The Dialectic of Sex, New York: Bantam, 1971.

<sup>11</sup> Aristotle, The Generation of Animals; Sigmund Freud, "Femininity" in New Introductory Lectures XXXVIII; Jean Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness, New York: Philosophical Library, 1956; Stephen Goldberg, The New Inevitability of Patriarchy, New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1973.

<sup>12</sup> Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Mettlesheim, On the Superiority of Woman Over Man, published 1529; Ashley Montagu, The Natural Superiority of Women, New York: The Macmillan Co., 1953; Valerie Solanis, "The SCUM Manifesto" in Sisterhood is Powerful, Robin Morgan ed., New York: Random House, 1970, pp. 514-519; and Jill Johnson, "Woman Prime" in Lesbian Nation, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973.

<sup>13</sup> For a consideration of the importance of rationality see Jean Bethke Elshtain, Public Man, Private Woman, Women in Social and Political Thought, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981; of individuality, see Simone de Beauvoir, The Second Sex, New York: Random House, 1974; and of spirituality, see Rosemary Ruether, New Woman New Earth: Sexist Ideologies and Human Liberation, New York: Seabury Press, 1975.

<sup>14</sup> Ann LaBastille, Woodswoman, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1976; Women and Wilderness, San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1980; and Assignment: Wildlife, New York: E.P. Dutton, 1980.

<sup>15</sup> Arlene Blum, Annapurna: A Woman's Place, London, Toronto, Sydney, New York: Granada Publishing Limited, 1980. I would also like to mention that I met Arlene through Luree Miller, author of On Top of the World: Five Women Explorers in Tibet, London and New York: Paddington Press, 1967. It was Luree's recognition of the practical application of the theory of sex complementarity which led me to write this paper.

<sup>16</sup> See Grace Lichtenstein, Machisma: Women and Daring, Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1981.

<sup>17</sup> I expect this text to be published through a grant from the Canadian Federation of the Humanities to Wilfrid Laurier University Press, early in 1984. I am presently involved in writing the second volume covering the period 1300-1800 with support from grants from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.